



Colorado River Water Conservation District 2003 Constituent Survey Executive Summary

“Water is the single most important natural resource for the West Slope of Colorado.” So spoke the residents of Western Colorado in a poll conducted by the Colorado River Water Conservation District.

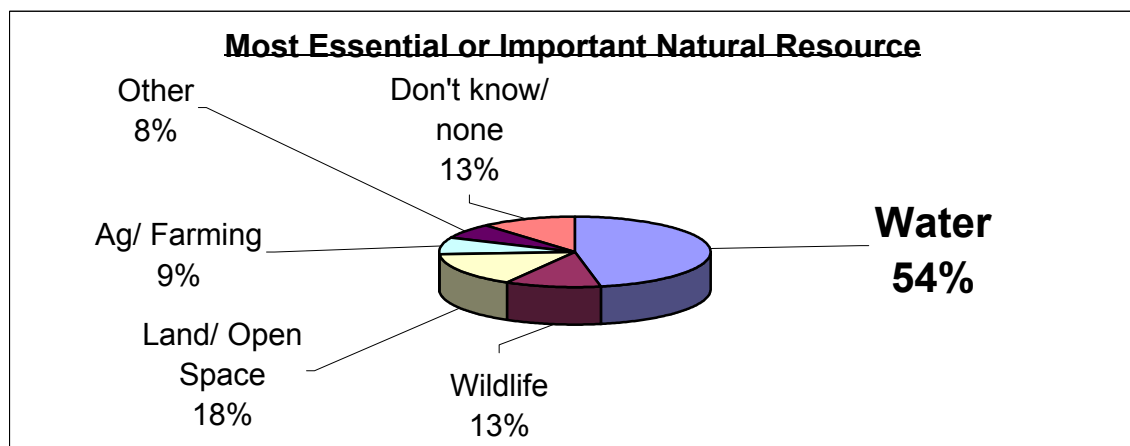
The River District polled constituents from all of the 15 West Slope counties within the district’s boundaries to gage the public’s opinion and knowledge of water issues in the aftermath of the worst single drought year in the recorded history of Colorado.

Methodology

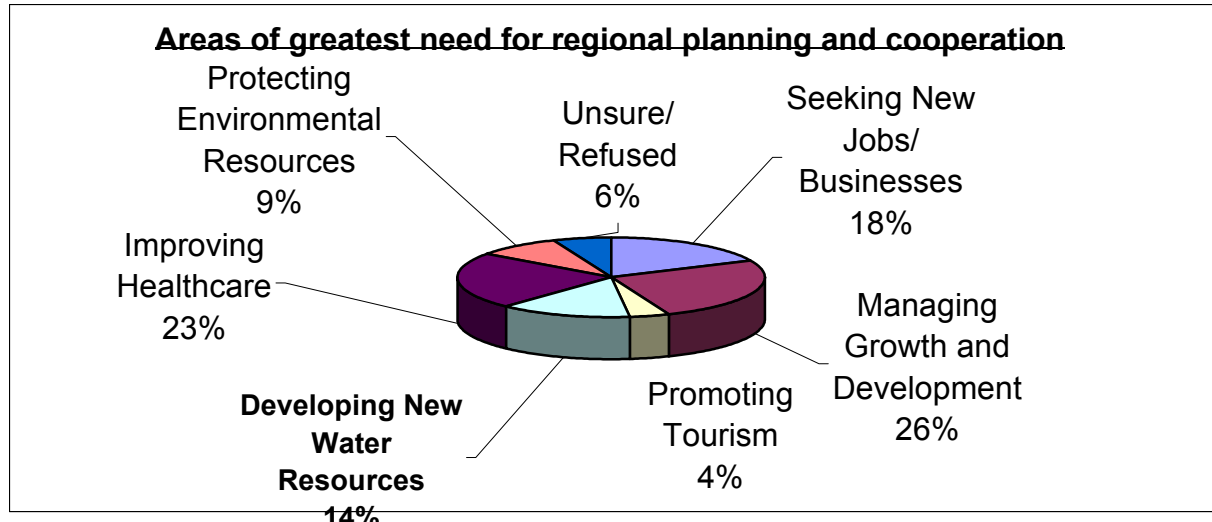
On behalf of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, Hill Research Consultants conducted a telephone survey of 552 registered voters from within the District’s boundaries. Gathered in the field from May 21-22, 2003, results were weighted to reflect demographic and partisan characteristics of the region and have a margin of error of +4.2% at a 95% confidence rate. Average interview length was 19 minutes.

Life is Good

For the vast majority of those polled, the quality of life in Western Colorado is good to excellent (87%). What makes it so good? Survey respondents agreed that Colorado is a place of scenic beauty, where good recreational opportunities abound and it is a good place to raise a family. Of all of the natural resources that contribute to the West Slope’s good lifestyle, water ranked as the most important natural resource (54%), outpacing open space (18%) and wildlife (13%) as components of the good quality of life in Western Colorado.



However, when asked what are the areas of greatest need for the region's leaders to engage in planning and cooperative efforts, development of new water resources was less of a priority (14%) than managing growth (26%), improving healthcare (23%) and seeking new jobs and businesses (18%).



It's the Economy

According to those polled, the West Slope's economy is what is in greatest need of repair. Over half of all respondents (52%) reported that better paying jobs are the most important factor to improving the region's quality of life. Second most important is reducing traffic and congestion (19%) in a region that lacks the large-scale road improvements like the Front Range's T-Rex project.

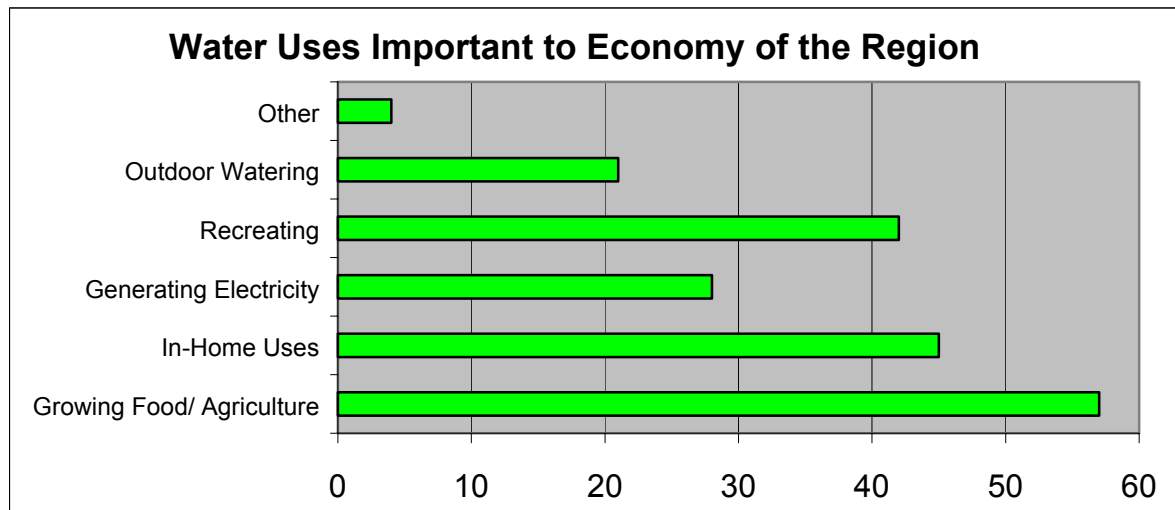
For residents of headwaters counties, such as Eagle and Summit Counties, the economic value of water for supporting their recreation-based economies was well understood. Tourism-dependant areas mentioned that recreational use of water was the most important use of this resource for their economic well-being. Recreation is not only part of local economies, but it plays a big role in the region's lifestyle as well. Among all persons polled, 44% participated in flatwater recreation and 41% recreated in rivers and streams on at least a monthly basis. Nearly one out of every four residents on the West Slope recreates on and in West Slope water at least weekly.

The majority of respondents believe that it is only somewhat accurate to describe their region as a good place to build a new business, reflecting the need for additional economic stimulus west of the Continental Divide.

The Importance of Agriculture

The most critical use of water in terms of economic importance to the entire West Slope is agriculture (57%). In a region that encompasses the high headwaters counties on the Continental Divide to the lower and more arid areas to the West, agricultural use of water

held the greatest sway over the region's economy. In-home use of water and recreational use of water ranked second and third in terms of total economic importance.



Should the District develop irrigation projects that help farmers and ranchers produce food? Sixty-four percent of those polled said this should be a high priority for the River District. Further, 67% said that Western Colorado's agricultural heritage, and the open space and wildlife habitat it enhances, should be protected by River District actions.

Priorities

When asked what the priorities of the River District should be for managing the West Slope's water, maintaining in-home access to water for drinking, bathing and cleaning garnered 82% of the audience's approval as a high priority, 79% agreed that protecting water quality should be a high priority, followed closely by protecting the ability of Western Colorado to put its own water resources to beneficial use (78%) and developing a comprehensive plan to protect and preserve the region's water supply (77%). Over half (51%) responded that developing new water resources should be a high priority for the District. Using water for watering lawns and gardens was the least important use of water both personally and in economic terms for the region (21%).

Threats

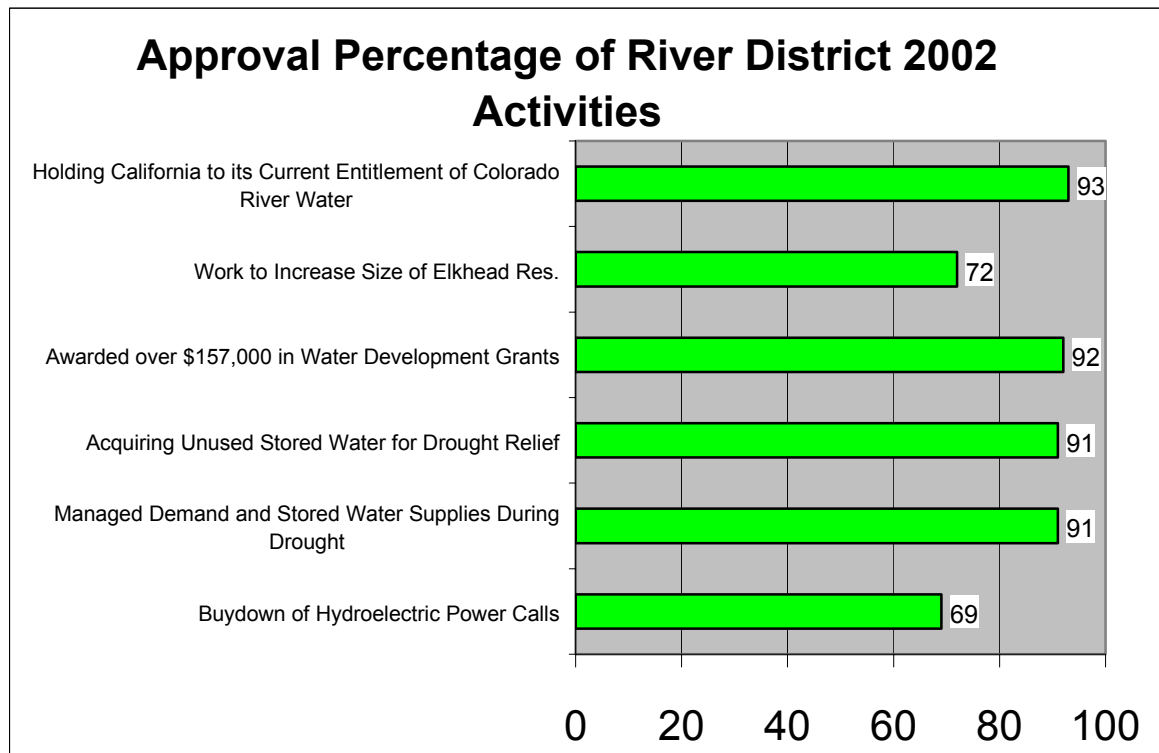
For a region that produces 80% of the state's surface water and has only 20% of its residents, the West Slope feels the heat from other regions wishing to prey upon its water resources. West Slope residents are most concerned about the threat posed by thirsty downstream states such as California, with 64% of the respondents feeling very threatened and 24% feeling somewhat threatened by out-of-state interests. Development of Colorado's remaining Colorado River Compact entitlement is therefore very important to Western Colorado.

However, Front Range communities followed behind California's threatening nature with 45% of those polled perceiving them to be very threatening and 39% seeing them as being at least somewhat threatening as a competitor for the West Slope's water resources.

Other West Slope water users, federal agencies and environmental regulations were deemed as much less of threat to in-basin use of water than either California or the Front Range.

The River District

The Colorado River Water Conservation District was very busy during 2002 managing water resources and shielding its constituents from the brunt of the drought. Despite the high level of awareness of drought conditions (87% very aware, 11% somewhat aware) and realization of the drought's severity (61% said it was very serious, 32% said somewhat serious), more people responded that they felt no ill effects from the drought (26%) than said it even affected their lawns and landscaping (19%).



River District activities to mitigate the drought's effects received praise from those polled across the boards. The District was given 91% approval for its acquisition of unused water resources to benefit Coloradoans left without sufficient water. Similarly, 91% approved of its management of water supplies and demands to most efficiently distribute scarce water resources. The District's grant program, which disbursed over \$157,000 to local water supply projects in the past year alone received 93% approval. Work to increase the size of Elkhead Reservoir to resolve conflicts between human uses and protection of endangered fish species received 71% approval and 69% approved of the

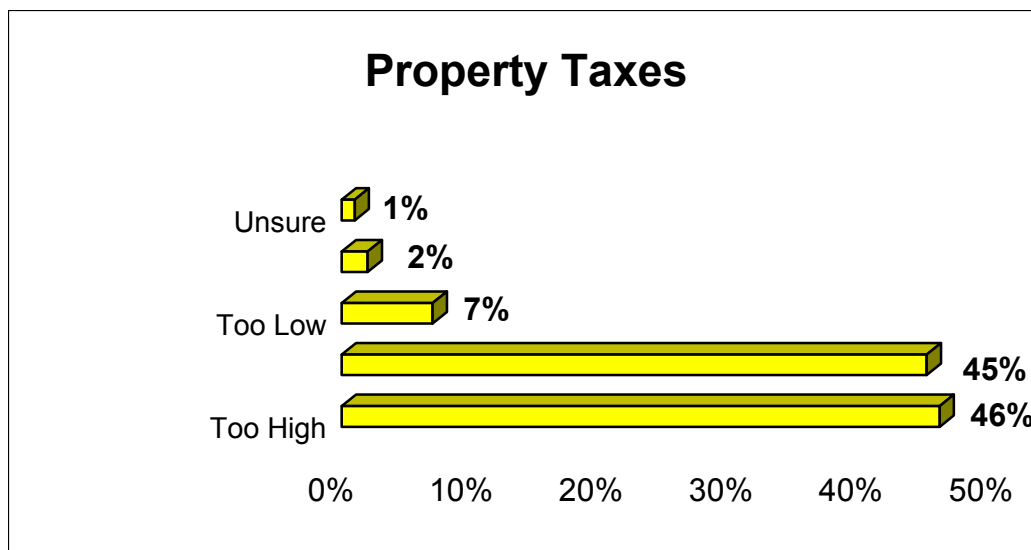
River District's compensation to West Slope hydroelectric power generators to limit or cease operations to conserve water for other human uses.

The River District's work in 2002 was effective in protecting its constituents from the drought and received their approval as well. Most of those polled, however, were unaware or only somewhat aware of whom the River District is. When asked what agency or person was doing the most to protect and preserve the region's water resources, only 7% of those polled mentioned the River District by name, but it received more mentions than any other agency or person, and received more recognition than state, city and county agencies combined.

Taxes

Property tax payers were just about evenly split over whether their property taxes to support local government agencies and schools were too high (46%) or about right (45%). Some constituents felt their taxes were too low (7%), while the remaining 3% said they paid no property taxes at all or were unsure. Of those expressing that their taxes were too high, only 17% said it was much too high, while the remainder (29%) felt their taxes were only somewhat too high.

Party affiliation had little to do with those who said their taxes were too high. Republicans (46%), Democrats (48%) and unaffiliated voters (44%) were within a few percentage points of each other in expressing their dissatisfaction. Those living in cities (34%), having lived on the West Slope less than 10 years (34%) or expressing a liberal ideology (35%) were least likely to believe their property taxes were too high.



Households of two adults and no children (49%) – a possible indicator of retired couples, conservatives (49%), those living in suburbs (67%) and rural areas (56%) expressed the most dissatisfaction with their property tax levels.

In Mesa County, home to the River District's largest population, 45% felt their taxes were too high and 48% felt that they were about right.

In the fall of 2002, when the River District posed Referendum 4A to voters to ask for a first-ever increase in their property tax mill levy to raise funds for water development projects, the referendum was defeated by a margin of 45% in favor to 55% in opposition.

Summary

Water has tremendous bearing on the economic stability and quality of life in Western Colorado. Water fuels the economic engine of the West Slope, and it is the economy of this region that has residents worried. To those polled, better economic conditions are needed and water is key to economic stimulus. Whether it is for sustaining agriculturally dependent economies or those fueled by recreation industries, additional economic infusions depend upon the water to support industries and businesses and people employed in them.

Western Colorado is keeping a close eye on California and the threat it poses to the state's unused compact entitlements. It is also very wary of the Front Range and its ability to remove water from the West Slope and impact the economy and quality of life.

New water development is a priority for the West Slope, but it must be economically beneficial and should not inhibit the quality of life and other values that water gives to the region.

The Colorado River Water Conservation District is not yet a household name on the West Slope. Yet, its actions and mission are highly regarded by those it serves.

Would voters go to the polls to vote for additional funds for River District activities? Several factors indicate this would be an uphill battle. River District name recognition is low, a significant number of voters view their property taxes as already being too high and development of new water projects was only given moderate support as a River District priority.

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The 2003 River District Constituent Survey successfully provided the River District with a better understanding of the needs and values of the residents and voters of Western Colorado. These values will act as a guide for future actions by the River District's Board of Directors.